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Biotechnology - GE Plants and Animals

GCC-5 Annual Agricultural Biotechnology Report

Approved By:
David J. Williams
Prepared By:
Mohamed Taha

Report Highlights:
None of the five Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC-5) countries covered by ATO Dubai have any biotech-enhanced crops under commercial production. Genetically enhanced crops and their by-products are being imported from the United States and many other countries. Limited research on drought and salinity tolerance is being conducted in a few countries. Currently, there are no local measures in place to regulate the importation or production of biotech crops. However, a biotech subcommittee has been formed under the direction of the Gulf Standards Organization (GSO) to develop a set of standards and regulations governing the testing and regulation of food containing biotech ingredients.

Section I. Executive Summary:

Commercial agriculture in the GCC-5 countries covered by ATO Dubai (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the UAE) is limited due to the harsh desert climate and limited water resources. While dates are a major crop, other agricultural production consists of limited amounts of forage, fruits, vegetables, poultry, dairy and a moderate livestock industry comprised principally of sheep. Consequently, the GCC-5 is reliant on imports of raw, semi- and fully processed foods to meet an estimated 85-90 percent of domestic food needs. In view of this situation, none of the GCC-5 governments have legislated any regulations concerning the production of GMO crops and animals. The Gulf Standards Organization (GSO) which establishes standards for all six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has formed a subcommittee to draft a set of standards related to the testing and regulation of foods containing biotech ingredients. The subcommittee was established in 2008 and has met few times.

Section II. Plant Biotechnology Trade and Production:

No GCC-5 countries have any biotech-enhanced crop under commercial production for either local consumption or export. There is growing interest in utilizing biotechnology to address issues like soil salinity and pest resistance, particularly in date palms, and UAE researchers have established ties with a U.S. university in biotech research. Currently, no biotech crops are under development. The GCC-5 import biotech crops such as corn, soybeans and their products from a number of countries including the United States.

Section III. Plant Biotechnology Policy:

Since the GCC's inception, the group has loosely pursued a policy objective to harmonize the food laws and regulations of member states. With the GCC countries moving towards customs unification to facilitate trade flows among members more emphasis has been placed on the harmonization of other factors such as technical regulations, standards and import procedures for food and food labeling. To date the GCC-5 officials have refrained from taking any official measures to curb, control, or regulate the commercial production or import of crops or food products that contain ingredients derived through biotechnology. The GSO biotechnology subcommittee which was formed in 2008 is currently in the process of developing regulations and standards related to biotechnology. Once standards are approved by the GSO, they are typically implemented by member countries as domestic standards.

Oman and Kuwait have conducted limited research on the use of biotechnology to enhance production of citrus and dates while the UAE is studying its use with drought resistant varieties of various plants and citrus. The Biotechnology Department of the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research has done some preliminary research on using biotechnology to produce date palm trees that are resistant to the red weevil which is causing serious damage to the date crop and threatens the future of this industry.

Oman and Qatar are the only signatories to the Cartagena protocol and both have formed biosafety committees. However, the role of the committee in both countries is still being developed.

No biotechnology crops are produced in the GCC-5 countries. Consequently, there are no established procedures in place to address environmental issues related to the production of

biotech crops.

Section IV. Plant Biotechnology Marketing Issues:

In general, there seems to be support for the potential benefits of biotechnology. However, consumers typically express a desire to be better informed about biotechnology, whether by local officials and scientists or through the labeling of food products. Regulatory officials in nearly all GCC-5 countries have highlighted the need for better education of consumers about the safety and benefits of biotech crops, while further developing regulatory capacity for the testing of foods.

Section V. Plant Biotechnology Capacity Building and Outreach:

ATO Dubai has conducted a number of activities over the past three years aimed at outlining the regulatory procedures, practices and research in a number of countries where biotech crops are grown and consumed. These activities have included seminars, meetings with regulatory officials and briefings by industry experts.

Section VI. Animal Biotechnology:

No animal biotechnology activities are currently being conducted in the GCC-5 countries. Similar to the GCC-5 stand on plant biotechnology, there are no technical regulations or standards that govern animal biotechnology. However, animal biotechnology will be more closely scrutinized due to the fact that genes from animals that are banned by Islamic rules could be used.